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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN THE MILITARY

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Abstract:

Nowadays extremists and extremist organisations use communications to influence and manipulate people; hence, the military organizations must try to come up with strategies to minimize their effectiveness and come up with their own strategies to win hearts and minds of vulnerable people who might otherwise be tempted to join them. It is regarded as an instrument of statecraft to facilitate the governments in order to influence the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of stakeholders, non-state groups, neutrals, in support of national security policies. In this premise, this paper discusses the concept of strategic communication in the military, in NATO and in the Romanian Army.

Key words: Strategic communication, NATO strategic communications

1. Introduction to strategic communication

The world today is going through a revolution; in fact, it has just got out of the last revolution and is entering a new one. It is not just about computers, or technology - every device which uses electricity will be alive. Communication between the governments – what we generally can call strategic - is going to be affected by disruptions in the future the same way that other industries, but there is always a need to keep communications lines open and reach-back channels in order to ensure avoiding misunderstandings. The states will have to do much more and much better in order to stay up with the times. They will need to have effective, timely counter-messaging. They have to be very effective in monitoring all channels so they know what is happening and that they respond timely and in the proper manner. There are many things the governments can do:

- They can address the real grievances and the perceived ones that fuel terrorism and extremist groups or organizations behaviours;
- They can help social media networks take down any kind of distribution of any kind of extremist violent messages.

The whole challenge of the future is about educating the citizens, how to tell the difference between false or true, propaganda and well-justified beliefs, and especially for the governments and the military organisations to use the StratCom as a tool for fulfilling their missions.

Kirk Hallahan defines StratCom as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”. To begin with communication, when discussed in the context of StratCom, refers to all the words and actions that are perceived and interpreted by audiences. Creating clear goals and understanding “how a certain set of audience attitudes, behaviors, or perceptions will support those objectives” is what makes communication strategic. In StratCom, message development, or the process of creating key points or ideas, requires high levels of planning and research. These messages are targeted, or created with a specific audience in mind, and help to position an organization’s communication goals with its structural goals. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected through new forms of communication, the role of StratCom is to help organizations understand how to effectively deliver their message to key audiences. StratCom is an inter-ministerial, intergovernmental, and inter-agency concept.

According to the Defense Science Board (DSB) of US, StratCom is an interactive process and a clear set of activities which include:



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- **Understanding** identities, attitudes, behaviours and cultures; media trends and information flows; social and influence networks; political, social, economic and religious motivations.
- **Advising** policymakers, diplomats, and military leaders on public opinion implications of policy choices.
- **Engaging** in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions through programs that support the national interest,
- **Influencing** attitudes and behaviour through communication strategies supported by a broad range of government and civil society activities.
- **Measuring** the impact of activities.

Communication is strategic when the scope of communication activities are geared for multiple and diverse audiences (rather than a generic or specific audience); when it occurs continuously through time (rather than being discrete at one point in time); when communication is receiver-centric, or tailored for suitability to audiences (rather than sender-centric); and when words and actions are matched to advance policy goals.

2. Strategic communication – increasing role for the modern warfare

In an article “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight,” published in the weekly Russian trade paper Military-Industrial Kurier, Valery Gerasimov, Russia’s chief of the General Staff, wrote: “The very ‘rules of war’ have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character.” According to the Russian analysis, the application of digital technology to democratic practices constitutes a strikingly effective new way of waging war. Gerasimov claims that information warfare can transform, in a matter of days, a thriving society into “a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war... The scale of casualties and destruction...are comparable with the consequences of any real war. In his doctrine the information dominance is an indispensable pre-requisite of combat actions - unless ones is already winning the information, it is going to lose, because information is a pre-requisite of combat actions, including media and social networks. Information confrontation runs through all phases of a war/military conflict.

Strategic communication became popular as a term, about three decades ago, from the times of the First Iraq War (1990-1991). Strategic communication is a vital activity that supports the military, in peace and in war.[1] StratCom is a vital activity for supporting the military operations and national interest. If planned well and intelligently executed, it can affect attitudes and behaviors [2]. It is one of the most important tools which can be used in order to shape the battlefield in advance. It is indispensable now for fighting adversaries who employ non-traditional and asymmetric means. Communication can be a strategic weapon of mass influence to assure allies and to dissuade and deter adversaries. It can give non-state actors state-like power to affect world events [3]. Our adversaries are using communication and information very adeptly to do just that.

While there is a continuous debate over what StratCom is, the term continues to be used differently by different people inside different governments. Part of the reason is that StratCom is in fact many things. It is a tool and instrument of power to support the national goals. It is a means to influence attitudes and behaviors. It is a process of listening, understanding, and engaging audiences. It is a process of coordinating messages across our governments and with the allies, and of synchronizing and integrating information with other instruments of national power. StratCom is both words and deeds.



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At its core, StratCom is a perception strategy. It is the massing of information, ideas and actions to align the perceptions of key audiences with the policy objectives. It is achieved through the synchronized promulgation of information, ideas and actions over time with means and content that are tailored for multiple and diverse audiences.

a. The Principles of War Applied to Strategic Communication

To effectively support the policy goals, we must be aware that communication takes place in four domains. The physical domain is where action takes place. The information domain is where information is created, manipulated, and shared. In the social domain, information is interpreted through historical, cultural, political and social experiences. In the cognitive domain, understanding is created in the minds of individuals.

Data from the physical domain is transmitted through an information domain; it is mediated by a social domain; and it is interpreted in a cognitive domain. The interpretation of our words and deeds can result in changes in attitudes or behavior, ideally in support of the policy goals. In the physical domain, the "say-do" gap has to be properly managed. The credibility is undermined when actions appear to undercut words. Not only do the words and deeds have a StratCom impact, but so does their absence. What is not done and said is just as important as what it is. There may be cases when the intention is to produce ambiguity by creating a "say-do" gap. In the information domain, trusted channels must be used in order for the audiences to listen. We live in a world where information is abundant, even in remote places. When information was hard to obtain and disseminate, StratCom depended on controlling its transmission. Now that information is available in difficult to penetrate areas that are under adversary control, StratCom will depend on the credibility of the messenger. What makes a messenger credible can vary across societies and cultures. It is likely to depend on cognitive and social beliefs as much as the truth of a message's content.

In the cognitive domain, we must understand the frames of reference others use to interpret the messages they receive, and ultimately try to alter them. As an example of communicating with Middle Eastern cultures, the most effective communications are processed in an emotional framework. The western world communicates using logic and reason.

Effective StratCom requires both language skills and cultural understanding and StratCom is a cost-effective tool for supporting our military objectives. The execution of a successful StratCom requires a planning methodology, based on an understanding of the four domains:

- The first step in the methodology is to define the ***policy goals***. Effective StratCom requires clear, consistent core messages that flow from policy goals;
- Next, the identification of the ***target audiences*** and conduct an audience analysis that assesses current perceptions and the desired effect on perceptions planned to be achieved;
- Next, the identification of the ***main themes*** and tailor messages and actions for audiences. Where possible, messages to appeal to a broad and diverse audience should be framed;
- StratCom requires that all ***available mediums/channels*** must be exploited to reach different audiences. In the information domain, this includes: radio; terrestrial TV and Cable; satellite TV; print; internet; streaming video and cellular phones. It also includes more traditional ways that information travels, like tribal councils and oral tradition. Actions speak as loudly as words: exercises; force posture; visits and person-to-person interactions at conferences and workshops; educational programs and exchanges;



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- StratCom requires purposeful operation across *time* to shape the environment and react to it. StratCom is also about long-term engagement over decades and generations to win the hearts and minds of diverse audiences, and to influence future generations;
- Finally, StratCom can be effective across a range of issues; *to act*, not just react, it needs to be proactive.

We are living in an entirely new information environment and are engaged in the first war of the information age. The enemy is a networked one and it has a highly professional and sophisticated propaganda machine that exploits electronic media, most notably the Internet, to disseminate messages globally, to recruit adherents, and to provide pre-recorded videotapes and audiotapes to sympathizers. The enemy's center of gravity lies in the information domain and it is there that we must engage it. StratCom has become a core capability.

3 NATO's Strategic Communication Concept

NATO has defined the concept of StratCom as follows: *The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities:*

- *Public Diplomacy,*
- *Public Affairs (PA),*
- *Military Public Affairs,*
- *Information Operations (Info Ops), and*
- *Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims. (PO0141, 2009)[4]*

Most researchers merge this term with Public diplomacy and see it in the prism of information operations (IO). The military uses StratCom as an integrating term for abovementioned capabilities. These capabilities are distinguished from IO capabilities that is a term to include Computer Network Operations (Computer Network Attack and Defense), Electronic Warfare, Operational Security and Military Deception. In IO, those capabilities are often non-kinetic, sometimes non-lethal, and often aimed at processes within systems that is, behavioural effects aimed at cognitive processes. *Often networked globally, StratCom both informs and influences, synchronizing and de-conflicting PA and IO themes and messages[5]* . In other words, *StratCom focuses on the cognitive dimension of the information environment[6]* . Military PA is a part of the wider NATO StratCom effort which aims to enhance coherence of all its information and communication mechanisms, both civilian and military. The Chief of Public Affairs Officer (CPAO) supports the commander's StratCom process by ensuring that PA actions, plans and objectives are coordinated as part of the broader StratCom effort. The commander's StratCom structure (if in place) will not affect the direct link of the Spokesperson or the CPAO of the commander.

StratCom is aligned with NATO's comprehensive approach, developed in April 2009 at the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit (NATO, 2009). StratCom applies to all existing information and communication capabilities. StratCom is a process designed to coordinate communications (words and deeds) between inter-ministerial actors and to reinforce their strategic effect. To achieve this, StratCom exploits all existing expertise found in the various information and communication departments. The aim of StratCom is to promote behaviour in target audiences that is favourable to the actors' objectives and, thereby, to shape the operational environment.

NATO had for decades focused mainly on hard power while information aspects played a complementary but less visible role in its activity. However, the failure of the NATO forces to generate public support in Afghanistan highlighted the limitations of traditional military operations and set the Alliance on the road to developing a StratCom concept. Russia's hybrid warfare against



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Ukraine and its illegal annexation of Crimea forced NATO to respond to a new reality and sparked a number of questions about its current approach, not least regarding StratCom's allegedly weak position within the Alliance. Meanwhile, the NATO-accredited StratCom Centre of Excellence, established in 2014, contributes to the Alliance's communication efforts and works as a 'hub for debate' across various StratCom disciplines. *In the face of increasingly aggressive propaganda campaigns from adversaries in the east (Russia) and the south (primarily ISIL(Da'esh)[7]),* cooperation between NATO and the EU is set to increase.

To address this increasing competition in the StratCom area, NATO is continuing updating their StratCom structure as well as the training of its personnel, incorporating both international and national experiences and contributions.

3.1. NATO's Strategic Communications' structure

The StratCom command structure is essentially comprising three levels of responsibilities. The first two levels are strategic while the third is operational and tactical:

1. The messages communicating NATO's objectives are determined at NATO headquarters (HQ), including the North Atlantic Council, the Secretary General and the Military Committee.
2. StratCom is then developed at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) under NATO HQ guidance. SHAPE has thus defined the StratCom concept, described its objectives and the expertise it requires. SHAPE is also in charge of developing StratCom training.
3. Finally, the successive Force Commanders are responsible for ensuring that their written, oral and behavioural communications transmit the messages determined by NATO HQ.

3.2 Training in Strategic Communication in NATO

Most General officers feel that they are both senior leaders and senior communicators[8]. Eventually, the audience is the best judge, of good communicators, those who build trust, and give a feeling that they are reliable. Nevertheless, StratCom for senior officers, especially for the charismatic ones, can be a force multiplier. The military must focus on the need to broaden the baseline communications skills of all the officers and make them all communicators. The military also must be aware that its communications professionals (implying strategic communicators) need to be culturally aware and able to operate in volatile, uncertain and stressful information environments.

NATO is currently developing various trainings regarding StratCom. It is important to recall that StratCom does not involve new competences but exploits those that already exist. As a result, training in StratCom comes down to ensuring its institutionalisation.

The NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia is an excellent source for individual training and will provide resource support to collective level training. The Centre of Excellence has developed the on-line course “Introduction to Strategic Communications” as a first step towards familiarisation, and to develop a unified understanding of StratCom. This course is offered for the NATO School and defence academies as a part of preparatory teaching, focusing on the training audience which does not have a communication specialists' background[9].

Also the NATO School – Oberammergau offers the, *NATO Senior Joint Staff StratCom Course”[10]* and, *NATO Strategic Communications Practitioner's Course”[11]* which are tailored to provide students with introductory knowledge of StratCom in the NATO environment, particularly on ensuring consistency and credibility of communications by all means through



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comprehensive coordination and to prepare StratCom Practitioners for the challenges and opportunities of conducting StratCom in the NATO environment.

4. Strategic Communication In The Romanian Army

In the document framing the information and public relations activities in the ROU MoD, issued in 2020, the StratCom is defined as – *the designing, consolidation and upholding of the favourable conditions for advancing the MoD politics, strategic or long term objectives and of the activities/operations conducted by the ROU Army, through the usage of coordinated programs, advanced planning, themes, messages and synchronized products, with the coordinated involvement of the public relations (PR), public diplomacy (PD), civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) and the information operations (InfoOps)[12].* The StratCom techniques used by the Information and Public Relation Directorate of the ROU MoD are:

- Communications campaigns
- Public events, seminars, conferences
- Interviews, press articles and reports
- Partnerships and collaboration protocols with MoD structures, other Governmental structures or NGOs and international organizations
- Newsletters and publications, guides, messages sets
- Books, multimedia products, posters, banners, videos
- Analyses, evaluations, reports to analyse the fulfilment of the communication objectives
- Internet sites, accounts/pages in the social media, publications, magazines, online apps
- Photo, arts and books exhibitions.

In the Romanian Army the StratCom term is relatively new, but some steps were done in acknowledging its importance:

- The National Security Strategy for 2020-2024 comprises, among other Priorities for the ROU Army capabilities, the *„issuing of a strategy for rapid reaction and for countering the hybrid threats, which should contain strategic communication elements, informational space security and the increasing of the communication infrastructure resilience against cyber-attacks, simultaneously with the adjustment of the national security legal framework regarding the new hybrid threats and the conventional high technology ones”[13].*
- The StratCom is assigned as one of the responsibilities of the Information and Public Relation Directorate of the ROU MoD, in the *„Instructions for information and public relations in the ROU MoD”[14], 2020 - the document that drafts the principles, organization and functioning of the information and public relations within the MoD: „the participation in planning, organizing and conducting of the StratCom programs/actions, in collaboration with MoD structures, other governmental structures, diplomatic missions or international organisations”.* This document also includes a section focused on ways to support the StratCom in the ROU Army.

5. Conclusions

StratCom is not the silver bullet, but it does present the possibility for a more tightly focused informational contribution to the strength of the other instruments of national power to achieve



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national strategies. Communication must be taken as a strategic weapon to support organizations, to discourage and deter adversaries. StratCom is not an additional activity; it is part of the planning process and conduct of operations. Actually, it must be prepared and shaped even prior to an operation, with the buildup of the narrative, the selection of media, and dissemination is essential.

Continuation of digitization of information – societies consuming digital information, fake data, disinformation; the deep divide in the societies and the tremendous effort to counter the anti-vaccination disinformation - will be the most notable elements of the first half of the 2021 year. Many people are struggling with the ability to distinguish between real and fake, facts and fiction, opinions and facts. The countries that will have successful governance models and capabilities will have the most successful StratCom and will be more successful in managing the emerging crisis. Fake news, misinformation and disinformation were in the front of the news lately, influencing the societies that are still not up to the new information environment.

The benchmarks for success will be defined by the capabilities of the governments, the military and their allies to operate in the new information environment and how they will be able to make an impact. Science is knowledge – it provides us the understanding of who we are, where we are and where we are heading. Just owning the knowledge does not necessarily qualify as a success – the knowledge that is making an impact is. Hence, it is essential to be aware of where we are in the information space, to understand the trends and the new risks and therefore make people better prepared. The new element in this narrative is, provided the right tools, prepared for those who will operate in a specific environment such as the military or the government.

Understanding the StratCom is a very strong element of the ability to survive in a modern world – as a country, as a government, as an organization, as a group or as an individual.

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